

9 Churches Grow

A great forest in central Europe is famed for its beauty in the spring and fall seasons. Footpaths, bicycle routes, and horse trails thread through the stately trees whose leaves form a lace pattern against the sky—a pattern so tight that sunlight scarcely pierces through.

We have been awed by the magnificence of these trees. If we were hungry, however, their beauty would not meet our need. We would rather be in a fruit orchard where our hunger could be satisfied.

Psalm 1:3 compares those who obey the Lord to trees that grow beside a stream and bear fruit at the right time. Christ has set the church in the world to meet a need—not just to be admired for its magnificence. It is to be like a tree whose roots hold firm, growing deep down to the water of life, whose branches blossom and bear fruit!

The Plan

- A. Establishing Roots
- B. Branches and Blossoms

The Goals

1. State responsibilities and requirements for membership in a local church.
2. Indicate the importance of church organization.

A. ESTABLISHING ROOTS

Goal 1. State responsibilities and requirements for membership in a local church.

Timothy and Mary return from a short wedding trip and attend a class for church membership. During the second class, Mary asks, “Didn’t I become a member here when I was converted?”

“When you were saved,” the teacher explains, “you became a member of the body of Christ. But you can also choose to become a member of a local church. This requires certain qualifications, such as being baptized in water and understanding basic doctrines and practices of the church.”

“Would you explain the real purpose of church membership?” asks Timothy.

“Yes, it’s like this,” the teacher continues. “The members of a local church are like a foundation or a base—something firm and steady to be built upon. This makes it possible to carry out the various church ministries and to be firmly established in a community.”

Members Form a Base

Perhaps you, as a member of Christ’s body, have wondered why you should also become a member of a local church. The true church, or body of Christ, is made up of all people

everywhere who have been redeemed through His death on the Cross (Colossians 1:20). This spiritual organism, also called the invisible church, needs a visible form on earth for people to see and relate to.

The visible church is made up of groups of people forming local bodies. Each church must recognize Christ as the Head, and that it is a part of the whole body. Each finds ways of functioning that suit its needs. These ways or methods of governing a church may differ, which results in different denominations being formed. These differences, however, are often only a matter of preference, or what works best for the group to function as a unit. What is essential is that its teachings are soundly biblical and that its members form a solid base from which the church can operate.

The church must be a voluntary association. No one is forced to attend or to support the church or to get involved in its activities. Its members love the Lord and willingly serve Him.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

We suggest the following points as general qualifications for belonging to a church. Each member should:

- Have a clear experience of salvation through trust in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9–10)
- Have an understanding of the basic doctrines and practices of his or her church (John 14:23; Acts 2:42)
- Be baptized in water (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38)
- Be baptized in the Holy Spirit or sincerely desire to be filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; Ephesians 5:18)
- Follow the moral standards taught in God's Word (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 18–20; Hebrews 13:4)
- Be a respectable member of society, obeying the laws of his or her country and honoring its leaders (Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–14)

RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERSHIP

People who flit from one church to another do not add to the stability of any group. But faithful members keep the church going and growing, forming the base to which newcomers can be added. We suggest the following points regarding the responsibilities of church members. Church members should:

- Live consecrated to God and open and clean before the world (Matthew 5:13–16; 1 Peter 2:9, 12, 15; 2 Peter 1:4–8)
- Respect the pastor and cooperate with him or her and other church leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)
- Support God’s work through regular giving of tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 9:12–14)
- Regularly attend church services and Bible classes, and take part in activities of the church (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:25)
- Establish a time of Bible reading and prayer in their homes. Family devotions bring great blessing to any home (Deuteronomy 11:18–20)
- Share the gospel with the unsaved and witness of what Jesus has done for him or her (2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
- Participate in the business sessions of the church and offer help and advice, according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It is important for you to join a church so you can serve the Lord more effectively. You can help the local group fulfill its mission as an expression of the body of Christ.

Application

- 1 Circle the letter in front of each true statement.
 - a) Everyone, believers and unbelievers alike, should join a church.
 - b) Church members should follow the moral standards taught in the Bible.
 - c) Faithful members keep a church going and growing.

2 If you joined a church, would you feel it necessary to attend the business sessions? Give a reason for your answer.

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Giving Keeps the Church Alive

The various ministries of the church need support. Faithful stewardship, steady and reliable giving, makes it possible for the church to take care of present costs and plan for future growth.

The earliest churches may have needed help to get started, but nowhere do we read of their continued dependence on other churches. Instead, the churches in Macedonia, though they were very poor, sent gifts to distressed believers in Judea. (Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–4.)

We have already learned that we can worship by giving the tithe (one tenth) of what we earn, and our offerings (more than the tenth) to the Lord. No one is too poor to give. Though in some areas actual cash income may be very small, a person can tithe in other ways (Leviticus 27:30, 32).

A tribeswoman of southwest China raised chickens for a living. She learned to tithe the eggs —laying aside one out of every ten for the pastor and his family who lived at the log-cabin church.

One day as she trudged down a mountain path to the market with a basket of eggs on her head, she said to herself, “I have such nice large eggs in my basket. What pity to keep back five for the church. Today I will sell them all, and later I will replace the tithe for the church.”

Just then she stumbled over a tree root in her path. She fell—and all the eggs were broken!

The woman learned a lesson that day which she shared with other believers. “If you hold back from God, you will be

the loser. That was my mistake, and that was the mistake of Ananias and Sapphira.”

In one Asian country Christians are taught to bring three “holy things” to the house of God: the Holy Bible, the holy songbook, and “holy rice.” Each time a housewife cooks for her family, she first puts one spoonful of rice into a bag. She takes this to church on Sunday and empties it into a container kept inside the pulpit. It is called “holy rice” because it is given to the Lord for His servants. It is surprising how this adds up when done faithfully by a group!

You can also find ways of giving your time and talents to the Lord. God will not be a debtor to anyone; He will bless you abundantly and His church will prosper.

Application

3 Circle the letter in front of the correct completion to the sentence. A church becomes strongly rooted when it has

- a)** visitors who give generously to its work.
- b)** strong backing from other churches.
- c)** faithful members who support the work.

4 What three things can any believer give to the work of God through his or her church?

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5 Circle the letter in front of each true statement.

- a)** Joining a church and helping to support it should be done willingly.
 - b)** Even a person living in poverty has something he or she can give to the Lord.
 - c)** If we give money, we do not need to give time and talent.
 - d)** The first requirement for church membership is that a person desire to help others.
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B. BRANCHES AND BLOSSOMS

Goal 2. Indicate the importance of church organization.

From the trunk of a tree grow branches. These spread out to give the tree form or structure. A church, like a tree, needs structure and strength to fulfill its purpose: structure in its organization and government, and strength in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Organization Gives Form and Unity

In Lesson 7 you studied about various groups within the church. Like the branches of a tree, they need to be held together as one. Proper organization not only gives stability, but helps the groups work together in harmony as well. The church needs leaders if it is to be self-supporting and self-governing. The Bible tells us something about the structure of the early church.

The churches had deacons. Acts 6:1–6 records that the church at Jerusalem chose seven deacons, or helpers. These were men of good character and filled with the Holy Ghost who helped the apostles by taking on some of the church responsibilities. See also 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

The churches had elders. In each church that Paul and Barnabas founded, they appointed elders—men who were able to teach and to minister (Acts 14:23). Like shepherds over a flock, they looked after the congregation, which the Holy Spirit had placed under their care (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1–7).

From this we learn that the local church was not under the control of one man, but rather, guided by a group of men. In any group of leaders, however, there is usually one head. The pastor today is the head of the local church and together with the elders and deacons serves and leads the church.

The Church's Strength

A tree's strength comes from the sap that flows throughout its system, giving it life. The spiritual strength of a church

comes from the Holy Spirit when He flows through every part and through every member.

The early church was a Spirit-filled church. Acts 4:31–33 tells that when the believers at Jerusalem met for prayer “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” And, “with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all”

Application

6 For the descriptions in the middle column, write the number that represents the person or factor described (right column).

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| ... a Gives the church structure | 1) Holy Spirit |
| ... b Gives the church strength | 2) Deacons |
| ... c Helpers within the church | 3) Organization |
| ... d Care for “the flock” | 4) Pastor |
| ... e Leads the local church | 5) Elders |
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The blossoms of a fruit tree are not meant just to be admired. They are for producing fruit. One day Jesus came to a fig tree looking for fruit. When He found only leaves He cursed the tree and it died (Matthew 21:18–19). Jesus said, ““This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples”” (John 15:8).

The church is to bear fruit first in the lives of the believers. This spiritual fruit is named in Galatians 5:22–23, the greatest being love. These qualities are impossible to attain naturally; therefore, we need the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the Lord wants the church to be fruitful in winning souls (John 10:21; Matthew 28:19–20). The Lord founded His church for this purpose—for us to belong to Him, to serve Him, and to glorify Him by bearing much fruit.

Application

7 State two ways in which Christians can be fruitful.

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8 Circle the letter in front of the correct completion to the sentence. Our primary purpose in bearing fruit is to

- a)** encourage church membership.
- b)** draw attention to ourselves.
- c)** interest people in Christianity.
- d)** glorify God.



Check Your Answers

- 1 Statements **b)** and **c)** are true.
- 5 Statements **a)** and **b)** are true.
- 2 Your answer. I would have answered *yes* because as part of the body I have a responsibility to fulfill in participating in its business activities.
- 6
 - a) 3) Organization
 - b) 1) Holy Spirit
 - c) 2) Deacons
 - d) 5) Elders
 - e) 4) Pastor
- 3 **c)** faithful members who support the work.
- 7 Your own words. For instance, by bearing spiritual fruit and by winning souls
- 4 Money or other natural resources, time, talent.
- 8 **d)** glorify God